

PUBLIC HEALTH in Battle in the 1850s

Few people can be said to have had such an immediate effect on a town as Edward Cresy, an architect, surveyor and engineer from Kent. He designed no buildings at Battle and his time there lasted only six days in the summer of 1850. But it was due to his powerful report that Battle obtained fresh running water, good sewage disposal, a well-managed cemetery and up-to-date guidance on how to bring light and ventilation into its houses, ancient and modern. He saved lives.

Cresy was the son of a Kentish builder. He was born at Dartford on 7 May 1792 and settled on architecture as his profession, being trained in London. As soon as the great European wars were over in 1815 he went on an extended tour of Europe, mainly by foot, to examine ancient buildings,¹ a journey that he followed shortly by a companion book on mediaeval buildings. On 17 March 1824 Cresy married Eliza Taylor, herself no mean authority: in 1826 she published her own translation from the Italian of F. Milizia's work of architectural biography *The Lives of Celebrated Architects, Ancient and Modern*, to which her husband contributed additional material. By then they had started a family, the last of whom was born in Paris.²s

The Dictionary of National Biography states:

[He] was engaged in building the Square d'Orléans artists' apartments at 80 rue Taibout. His experiences here during the July revolution of 1830 were recorded by Charles Knight. Although successful, this venture interfered with his professional prospects at home. His practice was mostly private, since he was out of sympathy with contemporary trends, disapproving of the system of open competitions on artistic grounds and deprecating the growing separation between architecture and engineering. From c.1836 to 1847, as estate surveyor, he supervised the development of Rutland Gate, Knightsbridge. He undertook commissions for friends, among them Charles Darwin, at Down House, Kent, and the collector William Cotton, for whom he gothicized The Priory, Leatherhead, Surrey, and built his own houses at 6 Suffolk Street, Westminster (part of John Nash's rebuilding scheme of the 1820s), and Holmesdale at South Darenth, Kent. Here, as well as farming 170 acres, he busied himself with local improvements. These included the construction of a gasworks, a bridge, and a village school, and some church restoration. However, he was mainly occupied in his extensive library, writing a series of books and articles on bridge-building (1839), on cottages for agricultural labourers (with C. W. Johnson, 1847), on Gothic architecture, and, most important, *An Encyclopaedia of Civil Engineering* (1847; new edns, 1856 and 1861), which long remained a standard work.

During the two decades up to 1848 there were growing concerns about public health. The country had been struck by epidemics of cholera, the deadly and rapid effects of which were only too plain to see. This was a disease new to the west since the end of the continental wars in 1815, when it arose in India and spread quickly. Cholera was not the only problem. Tuberculosis (or consumption) was endemic and it was clearly associated with cold and damp conditions; typhoid was common, and associated with foul water. Typhus was another. The actual causes of these scourges were unknown at the time, but what was clear was that better living conditions lessened both their incidence and their impact. In addition to cesspools and slaughterhouses the churchyards were also connected with disease: parishes had the duty to bury the dead but often had insufficient space in which to do so, leading to insufficient depth of burial and a consequent flow of noxious effluent.

It was in this period that modern Britain emerged. Parliament had been reformed in 1832, and much of local government shortly thereafter; modern police forces began from 1829; from 1834 the poor law was improved. The railways were being built. In 1847 Liverpool appointed the country's first Medical Officer of Health, following a private Act of Parliament obtained by that city, which was facing probably the worst health crisis in the country. Parliament had been unwilling to take more general action and needed much persuasion, but in 1848 it passed the Public Health Act. The Act established a General Board of Health and allowed towns of a certain size to petition for a survey that could lead to the creation of a local sanitary board with powers to make improvements. In due course fifty local rate-payers of Battle – the required minimum – petitioned the Board.

The petitioners included some of the best-known names of the town, though – perhaps oddly – not one of the Websters of Battle Abbey.

The Rev Rose Fuller Whistler (1825-94) was a scion of an ancient family and born at Battle. In 1851 he was curate at Battle, and later rector of Hollington, rector of Penhurst and vicar of Ashburnham. His family remained in Battle and are still there. He married into the Watts family.

William Polhill Kell (1803-62) was a solicitor living in the High Street, Lewes. He was 47, born at Lewes and unmarried. He lived with his sister Sarah and two resident servants. He was the local coroner, as had been his father Nathaniel who was living in Mount Street at the time.

John Underwood, a surgeon trained in Edinburgh and 'actually practising', was aged 34, born at Pitchford, Northamptonshire. His wife was Jane Ann, aged 32, born at Mountfield. Their children were Clara and Marian (ages unclear, both born at Battle); and there were two resident servants. They lived in Battle town. Underwood later practised at Hastings and died there in 1900.

Edward Holland is described by Cresy as surgeon to the Battle Union; the 1851 census gives no occupation. He was then 26, born at Horsham, and married to Mary; they had five daughters and one son; there was one resident servant. They lived in the High Street. Records of his life are scarce; an Edward Holland died in the Battle area in 1894 but this may well not be him.

Wellar must be William Weller, a saddler and coal merchant who was also superintendent of the Battle gasworks opened in 1838. In 1851 he was 55, and there was one son and one daughter; although married, his wife did not appear in the census. He died in 1874.

Lansdell would be James Lansdell, but as he was a property owner rather than a resident he is harder to trace.

Tell seems to be a misspelling for Till, an ironmongery firm well-known until very recent times. This must be George Till, who in 1851 was recorded as 39 years of age, born at Gamston in Lincolnshire. He was living in the High Street with his wife Jane, born at Battle, two daughters and a son and two resident servants. He died at Battle in 1870.

James Laurence appears in 1851 as an ironmonger (if it is the same man) living in the High Street. He was 51 and living with his wife Maria Elizabeth. He employed two men and five apprentices. He died at Battle in 1877.

Porter: this man cannot be found with any degree of certainty.

Thomas Ticehurst (1803-76) was a land surveyor and sometime clerk to the Battle Union, a son of the redoubtable William Ticehurst.

Robert Young was a solicitor and partner to Richard Ellman; the firm later became Raper's, then Raper and Fovargue, then Herington's. In 1851 he was aged 34, born at Tewkesbury, and living with his wife Jane Catherine and three sons and four daughters. By 1861 the family had moved to Paddington. He died there in 1867. Frederick Ellman was the senior partner, living in the same building as his firm in Upper Lake. In 1851 he was 38, born at West Firlie and married to Catherine. They were living with two daughters, one son, Catherine's mother and four resident servants. He died at Battle in 1870.

Robert Watts, a surgeon, was a member of a distinguished medical Battle family that had already been in the town for some two hundred years. By 1851 he was described solely as a gentleman aged 66, born at Winchelsea and living with his wife Margaret, aged 48; he died at Battle in 1857. His brother James had also been a doctor at Battle.

Cresy was a Chartered Engineer and had turned his attention away from architecture itself towards the problems of public health. The Board appointed him one of the first surveyors. He surveyed conditions in sixteen towns in the south of England, among them Cheltenham, Eton, Hastings and Battle.³ He arrived at Battle in June 1850.

It is clear from his report⁴ that the conditions in the town were very far from satisfactory, and Cresy did not pull his punches. It was a full report, of some 28 pages, and it told a miserable tale.

With the exception of one house on the Hastings Road the population obtained its water from collected roofwater or from wells that were often polluted. (This must have been common in towns and villages built largely on ridges.) Sewage went into cesspools that sometimes overflowed and were almost always foul-smelling. There were numerous slaughterhouses and piggeries whose effluent was difficult to control and sometimes flowed into neighbouring houses. Some of the houses were badly ventilated and damp. Diseases such as typhoid and typhus were common. Conditions in the churchyard were such as to require a complete cessation of burials there following the acquisition of land for a modern cemetery.

Unfortunately Cresy did not arrange his comments in strict order of property - no doubt he could gain access only at certain times - so it is possible to identify only some of the properties that he inspected. One row of houses is that in Upper Lake, leading away from the churchyard. The first of these was the

office of the solicitor Ellman (now Herington's). The level of these rooms was, and remains, lower than that of the heaped-up graves close to them; Cresy found them damp and liable to be infected by noxious fluid from the churchyard. Ellman's dwelling, on the side away from the churchyard, had a pump that could be used by the cottages further on; but those five cottages had only one badly-constructed privy for their use. Further on, on the east side of Lower Lake, there was a house with a privy and pigsties at the rear, at a higher level, and their overflow ran across its floor.

What is now the Pilgrims' Rest (which he called the Almonry) was

occupied by several tenants. The first family is Frank Butler's, behind which are two cottages, weather-boarded on the outside, occupied by Jenner and Hayward... badly ventilated, there being no windows in the rear. Pigsties and open cesspools close to the houses, discharging by fetid ditches into the George Meadow, are much complained of from the smells which arise.

The Almonry is an old timbered house, covered with tiles, and under that part of the roof which is in the occupation of James Jenner, several pigs are kept; and where Ashton Tongs has his rooms, both pigs and privy are highly offensive. The three families who reside here ... have all had fever ... how different the state of this old mansion when occupied by the steward of the wealthy Abbey, placed in the midst of a well-cultivated garden, occupied by one family, and surrounded by a healthy atmosphere, instead of the pollution which now lies at the very threshold.

Further northwest, what is now Western Avenue was then Skipton Lane. By means of a ditch on either side it received effluent not only from the current Almonry and pigsties belonging to Mr Eastern but also from the Wellington Inn and another house across the road. (For good reason this lane was known, no doubt informally, as Shit Alley.)

On the eastern side of the High Street there was a ditch behind the houses that collected material from privies, cesspools and slaughterhouses that ultimately must have run into the stream at the foot of what is now the National Trust field off Marley Lane.

These conditions cannot have been unusual in English towns but at Battle they were exacerbated by the fact of it being on a ridge, with a consequent lack of running water, and by the clay soil that did not allow percolation. The prevalence of stench and fever, and the growing conviction that domestic conditions were closely associated with disease – though the actual causes were unknown – must have been the prompt for the ratepayers to make their petition. Most of them lived in or had frequently had to traverse the areas of the town that were most offensive. Only one defender of the then state of affairs is recorded: one inhabitant reluctant to lose her piggery because she had an income from the sale of manure.

Cresy made seven recommendations: the establishment of a local board of health; a proper sewerage system connected to all the houses in the town, leading to disposal points; the closure of all cesspits and the provision of proper drainage within all houses, including sinks; prohibition of building new dwellings on unhealthy sites and without adequate ventilation and light; the building of one common slaughterhouse for the use of the butchers; a new cemetery and the stopping of all burials in the church and churchyard; the building of reservoirs and pipes to convey fresh water throughout the town. He costed everything, concluding that the sale of sewage products would pay for the improvements.

The General Board of Health published the report on 24 December 1850 and asked for comments on or before the next 18 February.

On 15 February William Cruttenden wrote to suggest that as the supply of water, sewerage and drainage would be confined to the town of Battle it would not be fair or just for the whole parish to be burdened with the rates associated with the application of the Public Health Act 1848. He also called attention to the 'dirty and defective state of the pavements and footways' of Battle which he felt had been overlooked by Cresy in his report.⁵ Cruttenden was a solicitor's clerk living with his widowed mother and his sister in or off the High Street. Born in about 1824, Cruttenden became a solicitor in the 1870s; his death at Battle was recorded early in 1895 and that of his wife Charlotte (Benporath) at 36 High Street in 1913. They had one son, who also became a solicitor (but in Bexhill).

On 17 February William Welles, surveyor, supported the recommendations contained in Cresy's report but like Cruttenden suggested an amendment to the extent to which the Public Health Act 1848 should be applied throughout the district as 'it would not be just for the farmers to pay for the supply of water and drainage of the town, but yet it would be desirable to place the highways under the management

of the Local Board'. He urged the Board to act on Cresy's recommendation for the immediate application of the Public Health Act 1848 to the district of Battle as he saw 'no obstacles to its immediate adoption'.⁶ Welles has not been identified from public records such as census returns. It may be that he was William Weller, one of those who had petitioned for the inspection.

On the same day James Burgess, probably from 74 High Street, also wrote in support. The report had noted the 'very bad state of drainage' at Burgess's house and the house adjoining it. Mr Holland, who resided at the adjoining property, is said to have pointed out to Cresy that he had had typhoid fever 'raging in his family'. Burgess regretted to state that it was now nearly 18 months from that time and no alteration regarding the public drainage had taken place. Typhus was said to have broken out in his family and one of his sons, aged 22, had died and another was currently lying ill. He requested the intervention of the General Board of Health to assist in the speedy removal of 'the evil'.⁷ Burgess was a well-established draper at Battle. The business was continued by his daughters after his death in 1876 and was sold in the second decade of the next century. His wife and one daughter were signatories to the 1866 petition for female suffrage.

Last, on 23 May and rather late, George Slatter wrote. He noted that the report was said to state that three members of Slatter's family had been attacked with typhus fever last year but he wished to clarify this statement and informed that, in fact, five of them had been attacked and that his eldest son had died. He further stated that 'some years since' three members of his family had 'died of the typhus fever' after which he had had his house taken down and a new one erected 'with large and lofty rooms and every precaution taken as to sewage at great expense' but still he found it to be 'of little avail' while living surrounded by 'a polluted and poisonous atmosphere'. He added that the sanitary condition of the town was much worse than it had been due partly to 'the number of small dwellings made in the different yards and passages and confined situations without proper ventilation or drainage'. Slatter stated that the town 'stands greatly in need of the adoption of the Sanitary Act' and recommended that the necessary works were proceeded with, 'with the least possible delay'.⁸ George Slatter appears in the 1841 census as a grocer aged 59, along with a wife and four children. He is not identifiable in the 1851 census.

Cresy's proposals were implemented, though with deliberate rather than precipitate speed. In 1852 an urban sanitary board was set up for the parish of Battle (which later became the urban district created in 1894 and is now the area, give or take some minor modifications, for which Battle Town Council is responsible); the board was to employ a 'surveyor and inspector of nuisances'. The reservoir on Caldbec Hill was dug in 1854, with more water pumped there from Barrack Field and Powdermill. The new cemetery was opened for burials in 1862. Sewers were laid and the sewage works opened at the same time, where it is now. The inspector of nuisances had powers to ensure that further improvements were made and that reversion to former habits were prevented. But for a long time only the town centre, where the real problem had been, benefited from the changes; it was the 1930s before the whole area was properly provided with mains water and access to main sewers.

Cresy himself did not live much longer. He died at South Darenth on 12 November 1858 and was buried at St Mary's Church, Horton Kirby, Kent. There appears to be no further connection between Battle and his family, which – no doubt annoyed at being always misspelt – seem to have accepted the Cresy spelling shortly thereafter. His elder son became an architect too, but died in 1870. The other three went their various ways, and one of Cresy's great-grand-daughters was largely responsible for his full entry in the Dictionary of National Biography.

¹ G. L. Taylor and E. Cresy, 2 vols. fol., London, 1821–22.

² One authority (see the Dictionary of National Biography) states that Edward and Eliza had five children. It may be that there were only four.

³ These names are to be found in correspondence records in the National Archives.

⁴ Cresy's report is at <http://www.battlelocalhistory.com/> (17 November 2014).

⁵ National Archives reference MH 13/18/168 folios 476–478.

⁶ National Archives reference MH 13/18/166 folio 472.

⁷ National Archives reference MH 13/18/222 folios 557–559.

⁸ National Archives reference MH 13/18/167 folios 473–475.